



# LJUBA

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## BIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

### 1934-1940 Childhood in Bosnia

Popović Alekse Ljubomir, or « Ljuba », was born on october 14th 1934 in Tuzla, in the kingdom of Yougoslavia. The king Alexander is assassinated a few days before his birth, black flags are hoisted to the house's windows. As his mother's labor was particularly difficult, Ljuba would often say that he was born “upside down”. His parents, wanting to thank the midwife, gave him the name she chose, instead of giving him the name of the paternal grandfather, in keeping with the serbian

tradition. As the only child of older parents running an inn on the road from Tuzla to Zvornik, towns of current Bosnia, Ljuba spends his first years folded on himself. He plays in the garden with their servant Steva, avoiding the place where, under a small tombstone surrounded by stawberry plants, was laying his brother, deceased before his birth at two years old.



*Ljuba in his mother's arms, 1935*



*Ljuba (left) with a cousin, 1938-1939*

## 1941 - 1952 School years in Valjevo

The day before the beginning of the Second World War, Ljuba's family moves to Valjevo, in Serbia, thus escaping the extermination of serbian population by pro-nazi separatists Muslims. The family members that stayed back in Bosnia were brutally murdered and all traces of their existence were erased (houses, tombs, administrative papers). During german occupation, Ljuba is in primary school. The teachings usually take place in the big room of a restaurant. The nicest part of the family house being requisitioned for the needs of german officers, Ljuba and his parents are restrained to only the kitchen. The family will never enjoy the comfort of their house as, Germans, finally gone, were quickly replaced by communists. This period is marked with games with his little friends and interest for sports, among which football occupies a special place. His first readings, adventure novels and comic strips, inspire him to express himself with drawings. During middle and high school, Ljuba starts to distinguish himself by his writing and visual expression skills. He wins first prize in a movie literary analysis contest, leaving behind him Živojin Pavlović, future movie director and friend. Ljuba makes promotional posters for a local movie theater, and thus earns his first salary. At the same time, he works as an assistant to the cabin operator in the projection cabin. This is how he developed a lifelong love for cinema.







*1951, High school football team, Ljuba is first on the left, standing up*

## **1953-1957 Belgrade, Academy of Applied Arts**

High school finishes with quite good grades, Ljuba aspires to continue his studies at Belgrade's University. Money is however a problem: his father lost a great amount of his wealth, and refuses to engage in remunerative activities. The family lives on state social benefits. The small amounts of money that Ljuba earns from time to time don't change much the situation. The movie theater director, who very much appreciates Ljuba's work, offers him to manage the movie selection from Belgrade, given a small allowance, and at the same time, to learn the job of painter-decorator at the Applied Arts Academy. With a letter of recommendation by his high school art education teacher, he arrives in Belgrade in October 1953 and immediately goes to the rector of the academy Branko Šotra. He is well-received, but learns to his disappointment, that admission exams are already over. In order not to lose a whole school year, he signs up to the History of Art faculty and to drawing lessons. In the faculty's library, he discovers the reproductions in color of the greatest masters. During the drawing lessons, he learns the foundations of the job while confronted with the reality of human flesh. He makes friends with several classmates that are also preparing the admission exams to the Fine Arts Academy. During autumn, Ljuba passes the exams and begins his first year

at the Applied Arts Academy, painting-decorating department. At the beginning, he does what he's told to do by his teachers, but the more time passes the more he has trouble with those exercises. To understand the shape and to reproduce it with exactitude is not enough for him. He wants to go beyond appearances and filter those shapes with his own sensitivity prism. By looking at the work of his classmates, he gets the idea of introducing the study of nudes and oil paint in the classroom. As his work becomes more personal, he goes into conflict with some teachers. Attached to his artistic choices and stubborn in addition, Ljuba is not ready for the smallest concessions. The breaking point will be reached at the beginning of the forth year, where he will be asked to leave the academy. Darkest days are coming.



*First school year of Academy of Applied Arts, 1954-1955*



*Ljuba's artworks at the Academy of Applied Arts, 1955*





*Ljuba in front of the Academy of Applied Arts, 1956*



*Ljuba with his schoolmates in front of the life-sized nude studies, Academy of Applied Arts, 1955*

## **1957-1959 Belgrade, Academy of Fine Arts**

Following his exclusion from the Academy of Applied Arts, another stroke of good fortune meddles with Ljuba's career. Ivan Tabaković, a teacher that appreciated Ljuba's work, and didn't agree with the decision to exclude him from the Academy, recommend him to one of his colleagues at the Academy of Fine Arts, the teacher Marko Čelebonović. That way, Ljuba continues his studies in the class of this terrific pedagogue, who will let him follow his own path and bring to maturation his own artistic experiences. At this time, Ljuba already owns a workshop, found a year earlier and restored with the help of two friends and schoolmates, Nikola Rudić and Miša Martinović. It's a dome, standing above a seven floor building, a large hexagonal area, illuminated by five small windows pouring in a curious yellow light. Many paintings that originated between 1957 and 1959 are given titles inspired by this place : Ghosts of the attic – Les fantômes du grenier (1958), Nude of the attic – Nu du grenier (1958), The green image of the attic – L'image verte du grenier (1959). Paintings from that period can be distinguished by a predominance of the human figure, with faded out faces, motionless, trapped in a worrying and suffocating atmosphere. The palette of colors revolves around yellow and burnt shadow, with some scarcer outings in green tonalities. During the traditional exhibition of student artworks, closing the school year, Ljuba meets the painter Leonid Šejka, founder of the artistic movement Mediala. This charismatic character, who advocated for the synthesis between the renaissance spirit and modern thinking,



immediately said to Ljuba : “You’re one of us”. No later than next year, Ljuba participates to the third Mediala exhibit, taking place in a gallery in Belgrade. This new friendship will end in 1970, with Šejka’s death. In 1959, an exhibit of surrealist art, Urvater collection, is presented in Belgrade. For the first time, Ljuba is able to see the original works of Dali, De Chirico, Magrite, Delveaux, Max Ernst... He is impressed, more than he would be ready to admit. His surrealist spirit is mainly expressed in his intimate writings, which he would call “Temperature of the Day”.



*Ljuba's first workshop « The Dome », Belgrade*



*Inside the dome. In front of Ljuba, The painting The banker and his wife - Le banquier et sa femme, 1959*

## 1959-1963 Military service and end of studies

After finishing the fifth and the last year at the Academy of Fine Arts, Ljuba decides to perfect his skills during two more years, in what was called “a master’s workshop”. He signs in at Milo Milunović’s, fearing at the same time being smothered by his supposed “authoritarian personality”. In spite of the rumors attributing him this uncompromising attitude, this teacher would know to respect Ljuba’s profound motivations by advising him only on the technique. Ljuba’s pictorial expression enriches itself with new shapes, at the border between the organic, the architectural and the mineral. His most representative paintings of this period are Isabelle and Le banquier et sa femme – The banker and his wife. At the beginning of the school year, Ljuba travels to Paris with some of his classmates. The aim is to visit The Louvre, to go for a walk besides the Seine, in Montmartre streets and to meet Dado – a painter from his generation, that left only Belgrade. This peculiar artist was impressing Ljuba, even before they first met. The simple fact of seeing him expose in Paris, and what’s more, in Daniel Cordier’s Gallery, was making Ljuba hope for a similar story. Advised by the teacher Milunović, Ljuba stops his studies after the first year in order to accomplish his military service. He is assigned to an artillery unit, in a fortress in Bileća, small town of the older Bosnia and Herzegovina. Being the sportive type, the military activities do not pose any issues. At the same time, he is in charge of the radio station, he draws and paints some paintings that he will later bring back to Belgrade. Among them : L’accompagnement – The accompaniment, L’élévage des boîtes métalliques – The breeding of the iron boxes and Jon Iitem. Autumn 1961, Ljuba comes back to Belgrade and signs up where he left at the Fine Arts, in order to finish what he started at Milo Milunović’s. His reunion with the Dome, with the unfinished paintings, and himself, leads to fears and discomforts that only an intensive work would tame. He finishes the painting Saint Sebastian by changing radically the initial composition. The monochrome – trademark of all his painting since 1957 is still untouched for the moment. His commitment to the burnt shadow will end, brilliantly, with a large format painting : Les Pèlerins d’Emmaü – Pilgrims to Emmaus. A strange pink/red tonality would then appear, with a fragmentation of the shapes, at the edge of abstraction. This fracture with reality, as well as his non-



submission to rules and their representation lead to taking distance from the group Mediala. From now on, what he will paint would not obey to any theoretical system. He discovers the same spirit in Dušan Makavejev, a young movie maker, whom he befriends and participates to his first movie “Parade”



Page of Ljuba's military booklet, 1. 10. 1960.



Ljuba and Miro Glavurtić, one of the founders of Mediala

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next parts to come



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